

Wisteria

Chinese wisteria, *Wisteria sinensis* (SIMS) DC.
Japanese wisteria, *Wisteria floribunda* (Willd.) DC.

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Wisteria is a deciduous high climbing, twining, or weeping woody vine that can grow up to 70 feet in length. It was first introduced into the South from Asia in the early 1800's as a porch vine. Before the days of air conditioners, the thick leafy vine not only provided much needed shade but the blue-lavender blooms also gave a most delicious fragrance on spring nights.

It is a very hardy and adaptable plant, and because of its aggressive proliferation it is now considered a non-native invasive species in all of the southern states except Oklahoma. The two most common non-native species of wisteria are the Chinese and Japanese varieties. Over the years they have become difficult to tell apart due to possible hybridization. These two have become a problem in many areas of Alabama where they have escaped from old home sites and quickly invaded forested areas. In warmer climates it will climb high into the tree canopy.

The woody vines can grow to 10 inches in diameter and have frequent alternate branching. The older bark of the Chinese variety is dark gray with light dots. The Japanese vine has a white bark. Older established plants may have a twisted picturesque trunk several inches in diameter.

Leaves of the plant are odd pinnately compound, 4 to 16 inches long. The Chinese variety has 7 to 13 leaflets while



the Japanese has 13 to 19. The stalks have swollen bases. Leaflets are oval to elliptic with tapering pointed tips 1.5 to 3 inches long and 1 to 1.5 inches wide. When young, the leaves are silky and hairy but turn hairless when mature.

Wisteria's pea-like flowers are very fragrant and can show colors of purple from lavender to blue-violet, as well as pink and white. The white Chinese variety is said to be the most fragrant. The Asian species bloom from March to May in grapelike clusters appearing when the leaves emerge. They are from 4 to 20 inches long and 3 to 3.5 inches wide. The

Chinese blossoms open all at once while those on the Japanese type open in succession.

The fruit and seeds appear as flattened legumes from July to November. They can be 2.5 to 6 inches long and about 1/2 to 1 inch wide. They are velvety and greenish brown to golden, and split on two sides to release one to eight flat round brown seed.

Wisteria grows on wet to dry sites and can reproduce from seed or runners. It prefers sun to partial shade. All parts of the plant are poisonous if ingested.

Once wisteria is established, particularly the non-native species, it is hard to control. If you want to grow wisteria there are two native species that are not as aggressive as the Asian species: American wisteria, *W. frutescens* (L.) Poir., has blooms 4-5 inches long and 9-13 leaflets; and Kentucky wisteria *W. macrostachya* that has blooms 6-12 inches long and 9-15 leaflets. Both prefer wet bottomlands and stream banks and bloom in the summer months. They are bushier than the exotic species and can be purchased from many nurseries.

With constant pruning, wisteria can be trained to a small tree. It is a very popular bonsai plant and all varieties adapt well to this. You can enjoy the wonderful fragrance of wisteria year round in soaps, candles, and perfumes. 🌸



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